

THE RAAG OF NATIVITY IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S *AFTERNOON RAAG*

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ABSTRACT

*Raag always remains a basic concept of the Indian English writers in the world of literature. With help of this melodic progression's art, many of the Indian writers have tried to reflect their skills in front of the world. Raag can be considered in various forms and each form belongs to a specific region or culture. Raag is a Sanskrit word that gets its shape from Indian classical music. Mathur, et al elaborated the term in his own way in their "Emotional responses to Hindustani raga music: the role of musical structure" It is a term that reflects a sentimental state of a person having, "feeling, affection, desire, interest, joy or delight"(Mathur et al, 2015, p.513), particularly related to passion, love, or sympathy for a subject or something" towards the native place. So here I have tried to observe the novel, *Afternoon Raag* in shade of the musical harmony of the writer which he plays in between two locations; the first is India where he belongs and the other one is Oxford where he presently lives.*

KEYWORDS: Raag, Music, Nativity & Longing

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INTRODUCTION

Amit Chaudhuri is a skilled writer who better knows to capture the mood of the events as well as the human sensibility in which they live and struggle. In this novel, Chaudhuri has tried to depict the mental plight of its protagonist who at present is a student of Oxford and feels struggle to settle himself in atmosphere of foreign culture. The narrator himself elaborated his plight and says: "Strange place, Oxford, and strange discoveries one makes within it! Strange students' rooms, with their own, always slightly unfamiliar, dimensions"(Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.136-137). He faces conflict at every level here in Oxford in terms of its culture, language, dress code and behaviour of the people. For the narrator "lived in a college among undergraduates. The rhythm and inflections, the sounds, were different here from those of graduate life. For one thing, the internationalism of a graduate building was missing; most of the undergraduates were English, and, speaking in accents that belong to different but neighbouring localities and region"(Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.93). The protagonist is itself a first person narrative who sings his raag lonely in front of us to reduce his pain of nostalgia that automatically creates a home around him. We can compare the miserable plight of the protagonist to the plight of the protagonist of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* who intentionally recites his miserable plight to the wedding guests who were on his way to attend a wedding ceremony. In the same manner, the protagonist searches for a companion in order to share his miserable plight. He elaborates the virtue of ragas in his own way:

The great part of the unfolding of a raag consists of a slow, evasive introduction in which the notes are related to each other by curving glissandos, or meends. The straight, angular notes of Western music, composed and then rendered, are like print upon a page; in contrast, the curving meends of raag like longhand writing drawn upon the air. Each singer has his own impermanent longhand with its own arching, idiosyncratic beauties, its own

repetitive, serpentine letters. With the end of the recital, this longhand, which, in its unraveling, is a matter of constant erasures and rewriting, is erased completely, unlike the notes of Western music, which remain printed upon the page. (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.42-43)

Jonathan Coe, in *London Review of Books*, has profoundly remarked for the novel: "Enchanting, studded with moments of beauty more arresting than anything to be found in a hundred busier and more excitable narratives . . . Nothing is too small or boring for him: he defamiliarises the everyday, reinvigorates the ordinary, and makes the humdrum seem exciting" (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, Inner blurb of book).

The novel, *Afternoon Raag* starts with a poem reciting by the guru of the protagonist in accompany of his mother. Its protagonist is a first person narrator who goes to Oxford to accomplish the task of education and finds trapped in a love triangle with his two foreign girlfriends named Mandira and Sahnaz respectively. He looks Oxford like, "a place that is not home, a feeling that cannot be exactly recalled or understood later, but which occurs at the same time each morning, until one gets out of the bed" (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.92). In beginning, he lifts every joy of Oxford's culture but later gets tired with its culture because the moment of loneliness and ghostliness compiles him to recall his home, which every time haunts him in vivid, sensory detail. Alice Truax in *The New York Times* (Mar. 2009) writes for the writer and says Amit Chaudhuri is an immensely gifted writer who is less interested in one particular story than in all the bits and pieces of stories that make up an ordinary life. His novels are crammed with breathtaking sentences, sharp characterizations, comic set pieces and melancholy grace notes as they are also stubbornly, teasingly plotless . . . In *Afternoon Raag* a more ambitious and more melancholy work a wistful Indian graduate student at Oxford alternates between describing his unhappy simultaneous involvement with two fellow students and his memories of growing up in India, where he and his mother took music lessons from a beloved teacher. As Lord Rama got nostalgic in memory of his motherland being the separation of fourteen years of exile period, in the same manner, the protagonist of the novel also finds covered himself by the same longing for his native place in Oxford. We can better understand the miserable plight of the protagonist through the below given line in a sloka in which Lord Rama is addressing his younger brother Laxmana:

‘Aapi swarnamayi Lanka naa mei Lakshaman rochaten janani
janmabhumishcha swargadapi gareeyassi’

[Lakshmana, even this golden Lanka does not appeal to me, mother and motherland are greater than heaven].
(quoted from Hanumannatakam Of Damodara Misra With Dipika Khemraj 1909)

In Oxford, the narrator feels a sense of humiliation for his native place among the inhabitants of his hostel room. No one was ready to cope with him from any angle because of his alien persona that always stands in front of him as his own replica. As the raag has various planes in itself in the same manner the narrator also has a friendship with various people. In Oxford, Sahnaz, Mandira and Sharma become the sole friends of the narrator. They every time try to pull him from his poor mental state. The narrator found himself matched with harmony of his Oxford's friends:

The narrator himself has been conceived as a raga. After reading the novel no clear and well-delineated picture of him emerges. What emerges are certain notes, tunes and volume and an effect, poetic, musical, dreamy and fluid. We can feel its touch but cannot see its shape. So the narrator and afternoon raga are in harmony with each other. (Rini Dwivedi, 2004, p. 83)

The narrator gets indulged in a sexual relationship with Mandira and Sahnaz and makes many promises for the future but later he finds failure to fulfill his promises as at the end of the days, he remains unable to bear the burden of these false promises. In an interview with Farnando Galvan he remarked on his miserable plight in Oxford:

I suddenly realised what a strange place this is, which I had never seen before, and the more I saw it as a local culture rather than someplace called England, the more I saw differences within England, that Oxford is this sort of place. It's a very unreal place, quite different from another small town, quite different from London (Amit Chaudhuri, personal communication, October 03. 2006, p.46)

Nativity also proves an important factor for the narrator during his short term stay in Oxford. He longs every time to come back to his native place when sees the local students among their native companions. For the narrator, they were the guys who could easily lift the taste of parental relationship at any time while for him it was difficult to go back to home town to meet his parents because they were farther away from him from his present location. Shilpi Chauhan perfectly remarked on the native longing of the narrator in her PhD thesis entitled "A Study in Theme and Techniques: The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri"

The afternoon raga shapes the narrator's vision of Oxford. The raga accompanies the mood of loneliness, nostalgia, dreaminess, strangeness and unwillingness for any affirmative action. The narrator's vision of Oxford too is punctuated by expression like 'enchantment,' 'dreamlike', 'tangible and unreal'. (Shilpi Chauhan, 2012, p. 66)

Not only the narrator but also his dear friend Sharma feels the same sensibility towards his home culture as "he was a sensitive person. A memory, a poem, or a song could move him so much that sometimes a tear, large and sticky, would roll out from a corner of his eye when he was recounting it to me. He would either wipe it away with a quick, self-conscious movement or dab his eye patiently with the handkerchief" (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.175).

Sometimes he is seen in moment of nostalgia for his native country and the slightest moment of rainy drops easily draws his attention towards his own village where he could taste the joy of friend circle of his native place:

I had never seen it rain like this in England before; water collected in the lanes and flowed past us as it does in Calcutta; and the English were excited at first and then reasonable and collected, telling each other jokes and enjoying themselves; it was all a little like but yet very unlike the wise dailiness with which an Indian outwaits a shower. Sharma looked at the sky and felt poetic and told me how he was reminded of his village. (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.38)

Tarun J. Tejpal in *India Today* (July 1993) highlighted that the novel *Afternoon Raag* comes to a description as a fragmentary memoir. The aim of the writer is not to tell a story, but to evoke moods, atmosphere, and frames of mind. Chaudhuri sketches out a moment of student life at Oxford, and his domestic life with his parents in Bombay, and then briefly in Calcutta.

After coming here to Oxford, the narrator gets each and everything in ghostly form. He remains in frustration for his native place for every time and longs the moment which he accepted himself: "what was missing was the background sound of old people and children, of babies and mothers, of families; instead one heard people running up and down the staircase, or visitors approaching and knocking" (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.22). However, he keeps continue his practice of singing raag in Oxford to keep busy himself in his own mood but the next moment he gets nostalgic again for recalling his native place:

As I am used to the sound of crows in the morning, this absence of noise would fill me with a melancholy which was difficult to get rid of because it seemed to have no immediate cause. It was only when I saw students, with their odd, comical gait, and their touchingly disguised sleepiness, walking down that road, growing, little by little, in number as the morning wore on, that I would feel an at-homeness and pleasure in their rhythm. (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.10)

Medium of communication via post card letters also becomes a major factor inside the novel for the narrator. The readers can sense the feeling of nativity of the narrator when finds him in eager state to wait for the letters from his home town. It becomes the only way of comfort for the narrator as he could taste the touch of his nears and dears. The written text becomes the source of energy for him as he feels an immense pleasure when find himself in accompany of these letters. Chaudhuri has elaborated his ease for the native place in his own way:

When there were letters for me - the cheap, blue Indian aerogramme from my mother - they lay there innocently like gifts from Santa Claus, they did not seem material at all, but magical, like signs. Then I would miss the special feeling of mornings at home, I would think benignly of my mother's good health, and how she suffers from nothing but constipation, how for three days she will go without having been to the toilet (Amit

Chaudhuri, 2012, p.20)

Foreign place proves a second home for the narrator where he always remains in troublesome state. Nativity draws his attention towards home every time whenever he finds covered his persona from foreign atmosphere. In the narrator's view, it is only, "home, where one gathers from their talk, happiness or unhappiness is a more unsurprising, everyday affair than here, home, where, one speaks another language, with sister and mother and father"(Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.94). In starting days his mother remains with him in his hostel room to defend him as a guardian angel from the odd behaviour of his hostel mates. His hostel mates create a big problem for him in his loneliness. They treat him as an alien for which the narrator would never forget them in future. The writer becomes nostalgic seeing the influence of nativity which he later shares in an interview with Sonia Phalnikar in *DW-WORLD.DE* : "I move about in Germany here with white people not talking in English. It brings home to me that regionalism doesn't only have to do with India, but has to do with Europe too" (Amit Chaudhuri, personal communication,1999)

Sharma also proves a realistic personality for the narrator as he always remains stand in his accompany to provide him the moment of pleasure. The narrator has claimed himself that: "Sharma and I were roaming around at our ease in loose shirts, two Indians who might never have met in India, feeling at home." (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.37-38) Sometimes, they are seen in close relationship to each other as Sharma wishes to write a thesis on Indian philosophy but longs to be a stylist. He has a wish to write this in English language so he pursued the narrator every time to make him skilled in this language. Although he performs every work in English way but from his heart, he proves a strict Indian persona as his room was filled with various types of pictures of gods and goddesses as they were hanging on the wall to reflect his nativity towards his culture. The given below song perfectly suits Sharma's personality and his longs towards his native culture:

Merā jūtā hai Jāpānī, ye patlūn Inglistānī

Sar pe lāl topī Rūsī, phir bhī dil hai Hindustānī

My shoes are Japanese, these trousers are English;

The red cap on my head is Russian, but still, my heart is Indian.(Web)

Jonathan Coe in *London Reviews of Books* (August, 1993) observes that Chaudhuri's novel *Afternoon Raag* tells only of a placid and uneventful life, a life of domesticity, routine and small daily rituals, in which a ride on a bus or a rendezvous in a café is the closest we are likely to come to adventure; enormous because Chaudhuri has once again turned this unspectacular material into something enchanting, studded with moments of beauty more arresting than anything to be found in a hundred busier and more excitable narratives.

The narrator mesmerizes his nativity as, "the tiny village in East Bengal he was born in, with its village school he went to in early childhood, seems to have never existed. It is now on the other side of the border, in Bangladesh" (Amit Chaudhuri, 2012, p.116). In this novel, Chaudhuri has well described the consciousness of the protagonist towards his hometown. Ease for the native place makes a home in his mind when nobody comes to share his grief in his loneliness. Vandana Rajpoot has perfectly remarked on native ease of narrator in her PhD thesis entitled, "No Place Like Home: Regionalism in the Novels of Amit Chaudhuri"

The novel talks about his stay at the Oxford University and his nostalgia for his parents and his homeland, Calcutta. Chaudhuri recreates the state of mind of a young man coming to terms with his loneliness, nostalgia and alienation in a unique way. ((Vandana

Rajpoot, 2016, p.30)

Finally from the above finding, it concludes that everything in the world has a lower place than the feeling of nativity. The motherland/native place has an upper place in heart of every person. Nobody can shake its place at any cost. A true native always paid his/her respect for his nation's culture in every part of the world. It is just like a tree in which everybody finds attached their personality with its root.

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